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COUNTER-ATTACK

AND OTHER POEMS

BY

SIEGFRIED SASOON

AUTHOR OF

"THE OLD HUNTSMAN"



LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN

TO
ROBERT ROSS

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DANS la trêve désolée de cette matinée, ces hommes qui avaient été tenaillés par la fatigue, fouettés par la pluie, bouleversés par toute une nuit de tonnerre, ces rescapés des volcans et de l'inondation entrevoyaient à quel point la guerre, aussi hideuse au moral qu'au physique, non seulement viole le bon sens, avilit les grandes idées, commande tous les crimes—mais ils se rappelaient combien elle avait développé en eux et autour d'eux tous les mauvais instincts sans en excepter un seul ; la méchanceté jusqu'au sadisme, l'égoïsme jusqu'à la férocité, le besoin de jouir jusqu'à la folie.

HENRI BARBUSSE.

(*Le Feu.*)

With acknowledgments to the Editors of

THE CAMBRIDGE MAGAZINE

THE SPECTATOR

THE NATION

THE NEW STATESMAN

THE ENGLISH REVIEW

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PRELUDE : THE TROOPS	9
· COUNTER-ATTACK	11
THE REAR-GUARD	14
WIRERS	16
ATTACK	18
· DREAMERS	19
HOW TO DIE	20
THE EFFECT	21
TWELVE MONTHS AFTER	23
THE FATHERS	24
· BASE DETAILS	25
THE GENERAL	26
LAMENTATIONS	27
DOES IT MATTER ?	28
FIGHT TO A FINISH	29
EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS	30
SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES	31
GLORY OF WOMEN	32

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THEIR FRAILTY	33
THE HAWTHORN TREE	34
THE INVESTITURE	35
TRENCH DUTY	36
BREAK OF DAY	37
TO ANY DEAD OFFICER	40
SICK LEAVE	43
BANISHMENT	44
SONG-BOOKS OF THE WAR	45
THRUSHES	47
AUTUMN	48
INVOCATION ^v	49 ¹
REPRESSION OF WAR EXPERIENCE	51
THE TRIUMPH ^v	54
SURVIVORS	55
JOY-BELLS	56
REMORSE	57
DEAD MUSICIANS	58
THE DREAM ^v	60
IN BARRACKS	63
TOGETHER	64

PRELUDE : THE TROOPS

DIM, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten down
The stale despair of night, must now renew
Their desolation in the truce of dawn,
Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

Yet these, who cling to life with stubborn hands,
Can grin through storms of death and find a gap
In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence.
They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy
Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all
Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky
That hastens over them where they endure
Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,
And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.

PRELUDE : THE TROOPS

O my brave brown companions, when your souls
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,
Death will stand grieving in that field of war
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.
And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass
Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;
The unreturning army that was youth;
The legions who have suffered and are dust.

COUNTER-ATTACK

WE'D gained our first objective hours before
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,
Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke.
Things seemed all right at first. We held their line,
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.

The place was rotten with dead ; green clumsy
legs

High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the
saps ;

And trunks, face downward, in the sucking
mud,

Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled ;
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering
slime.

And then the rain began,—the jolly old rain !

COUNTER-ATTACK

A yawning soldier knelt against the bank,
Staring across the morning blear with fog;
He wondered when the Allemands would get busy;
And then, of course, they started with five-nines
Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud.
Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them
burst

Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell,
While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke.
He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,
Sick for escape,—loathing the strangled horror
And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

An officer came blundering down the trench :
“ Stand-to and man the fire-step ! ” On he
went . . .

Gasping and bawling, “ Fire-step . . . counter-
attack ! ”

Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right
Down the old sap : machine-guns on the left ;
And stumbling figures looming out in front.

“ O Christ, they’re coming at us ! ” Bullets
spat,

And he remembered his rifle . . . rapid fire . . .

COUNTER-ATTACK

And started blazing wildly . . . then a bang
Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out
To grunt and wriggle : none heeded him ; he choked
And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans . . .
Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

THE REAR-GUARD

(Hindenburg Line, April 1917.)

GROPING along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw some one lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no
sleep,)
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,

THE REAR-GUARD

And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before ;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.

At last, with sweat of horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

WIERS

"PASS it along, the wiring party's going out"—
And yawning sentries mumble, "Wirers going out."
Unravelling; twisting; hammering stakes with
 muffled thud,
They toil with stealthy haste and anger in their blood.

The Boche sends up a flare. Black forms stand
rigid there,
Stock-still like posts; then darkness, and the
clumsy ghosts
Stride hither and thither, whispering, tripped by
clutching snare
Of snags and tangles.

Ghastly dawn with vaporous coasts
 Gleams desolate along the sky, night's misery
 ended.

WIRERS

Young Hughes was badly hit; I heard him carried
away,
Moaning at every lurch; no doubt he'll die to-day.
But *we* can say the front-line wire's been safely
mended.

ATTACK

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glowering sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that
shroud

The menacing scarred slope ; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesu, make it stop !

DREAMERS

SOLDIERS are citizens of death's gray land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.

HOW TO DIE

DARK clouds are smouldering into red

While down the craters morning burns.

The dying soldier shifts his head

To watch the glory that returns :

He lifts his fingers toward the skies

Where holy brightness breaks in flame ;

Radiance reflected in his eyes,

And on his lips a whispered name.

You'd think, to hear some people talk,

That lads go West with sobs and curses,

And sullen faces white as chalk,

Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.

But they've been taught the way to do it

Like Christian soldiers ; not with haste

And shuddering groans ; but passing through it

With due regard for decent taste.

THE EFFECT

"The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before."—*War Correspondent.*

"He'd never seen so many dead before."

They sprawled in yellow daylight while he swore
And gasped and lugged his everlasting load
Of bombs along what once had been a road.

"How peaceful are the dead."

Who put that silly gag in some one's head?

"He'd never seen so many dead before."

The lilting words danced up and down his brain,
While corpses jumped and capered in the rain.
No, no; he wouldn't count them any more . . .
The dead have done with pain :
They've choked ; they can't come back to life again .

When Dick was killed last week he looked like that,
Flapping along the fire-step like a fish,

THE EFFECT

After the blazing crump had knocked him flat' . .

" How many dead ? As many as ever you wish.

Don't count 'em ; they're too many.

Who'll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny ? "

TWELVE MONTHS AFTER

HULLO ! here's my platoon, the lot I had last year.

" The war 'll be over soon."

" What 'opes ? "

" No bloody fear ! "

Then, " Number Seven, 'shun ! All present and
correct."

They're standing in the sun, impassive and erect.
Young Gibson with his grin ; and Morgan, tired
and white ;

Jordan, who's out to win a D.C.M. some night ;
And Hughes that's keen on wiring ; and Davies ('79),
Who always must be firing at the Boche front line.

* * * * *

" Old soldiers never die ; they simply fide a-why ! "
That's what they used to sing along the roads last
spring ;

That's what they used to say before the push
began ;

That's where they are to-day, knocked over to a man.

THE FATHERS

SNUG at the club two fathers sat,
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat.
One of them said : “ My eldest lad
Writes cheery letters from Bagdad.
But Arthur’s getting all the fun
At Arras with his nine-inch gun.”

“ Yes,” wheezed the other, “ that’s the luck !
My boy’s quite broken-hearted, stuck
In England training all this year.
Still, if there’s truth in what we hear,
The Huns intend to ask for more
Before they bolt across the Rhine.”
I watched them toddle through the door—
These impotent old friends of mine.

BASE DETAILS

IF I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.

You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. "Poor young chap,"
I'd say—"I used to know his father well;

Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.

THE GENERAL

“GOOD-MORNING; good-morning!” the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of ’em dead,
And we’re cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
“He’s a cheery old card,” grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

* * * * *

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

LAMENTATIONS

I FOUND him in the guard-room at the Base.
From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
And, all because his brother had gone West,
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was
kneeling
Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

DOES IT MATTER?

Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .

For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When the others come in after hunting
To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter?—losing your sight? . . .

There's such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.

Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit? . . .

You can drink and forget and be glad,
And people won't say that you're mad;
For they'll know that you've fought for your
country,
And no one will worry a bit.

FIGHT TO A FINISH

THE boys came back. Bands played and flags
were flying,

And Yellow-Pressmen thronged the sunlit street
To cheer the soldiers who'd refrained from dying,
And hear the music of returning feet.

"Of all the thrills and ardours War has brought,
This moment is the finest." (So they thought.)

Snapping their bayonets on to charge the mob,
Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel.
At last the boys had found a cushy job.

* * * * *

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and went
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS

HE seemed so certain "all was going well,"
As he discussed the glorious time he'd had
While visiting the trenches.

"One can tell
You've gathered big impressions!" grinned the lad
Who'd been severely wounded in the back
In some wiped-out impossible Attack.
"Impressions? Yes, most vivid! I am writing
A little book called *Europe on the Rack*,
Based on notes made while witnessing the fighting.
I hope I've caught the feeling of 'the Line,'
And the amazing spirit of the troops.
By Jove, those flying-chaps of ours are fine!
I watched one daring beggar looping loops,
Soaring and diving like some bird of prey.
And through it all I felt that splendour shine
Which makes us win."

The soldier sipped his wine.

"Ah, yes, but it's the Press that leads the way!"

SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES

I KNEW a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

* * * * *

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

GLORY OF WOMEN

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're
killed.

You can't believe that British troops "retire"
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

THEIR FRAILITY

HE's got a Blighty wound. He's safe; and then
War's fine and bold and bright.
She can forget the doomed and prisoned men
Who agonize and fight.

He's back in France. She loathes the listless strain
And peril of his plight.
Beseeching Heaven to send him home again,
She prays for peace each night.

Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere
They die; War bleeds us white.
Mothers and wives and sweethearts,—they don't
care
So long as He's all right.

THE HAWTHORN TREE

Not much to me is yonder lane
Where I go every day;
But when there's been a shower of rain
And hedge-birds whistle gay,
I know my lad that's out in France
With fearsome things to see
Would give his eyes for just one glance
At our white hawthorn tree.

* * * * *

Not much to me is yonder lane
Where *he* so longs to tread;
But when there's been a shower of rain
I think I'll never weep again
Until I've heard he's dead.

THE INVESTITURE

God with a Roll of Honour in His hand
Sits welcoming the heroes who have died,
While sorrowless angels ranked on either side
Stand easy in Elysium's meadow-land.
Then *you* come shyly through the garden gate,
Wearing a blood-soaked bandage on your head;
And God says something kind because you're dead,
And homesick, discontented with your fate.

If I were there we'd snowball Death with skulls;
Or ride away to hunt in Devil's Wood
With ghosts of puppies that we walked of old.
But you're alone; and solitude annuls
Our earthly jokes; and strangely wise and good
You roam forlorn along the streets of gold.

TRENCH DUTY

SHAKEN from sleep, and numbed and scarce awake,
Out in the trench with three hours' watch to take,
I blunder through the splashing mirk; and then
Hear the gruff muttering voices of the men
Crouching in cabins candle-chinked with light.
Hark! There's the big bombardment on our right
Rumbling and bumping; and the dark's a glare
Of flickering horror in the sectors where
We raid the Boche; men waiting, stiff and chilled,
Or crawling on their bellies through the wire.

“What? Stretcher-bearers wanted? Some one
killed?”

Five minutes ago I heard a sniper fire :
Why did he do it? . . . Starlight overhead—
Blank stars. I'm wide-awake; and some chap's dead.

BREAK OF DAY

THERE seemed a smell of autumn in the air
At the bleak end of night; he shivered there
In a dank, musty dug-out where he lay,
Legs wrapped in sand-bags,—lumps of chalk and
clay

Splattering his face. Dry-mouthed, he thought,
“ To-day

We start the damned attack; and, Lord knows why,
Zero's at nine; how bloody if I'm done in
Under the freedom of that morning sky ! ”
And then he coughed and dozed, cursing the din.

Was it the ghost of autumn in that smell
Of underground, or God's blank heart grown kind,
That sent a happy dream to him in hell ?—
Where men are crushed like clods, and crawl to find
Some crater for their wretchedness; who lie
In outcast immolation, doomed to die
Far from clean things or any hope of cheer,
Cowed anger in their eyes, till darkness brims

BREAK OF DAY

And roars into their heads, and they can hear
Old childish talk, and tags of foolish hymns.

He sniffs the chilly air; (his dreaming starts).
He's riding in a dusty Sussex lane
In quiet September; slowly night departs;
And he's a living soul, absolved from pain.
Beyond the brambled fences where he goes
Are glimmering fields with harvest piled in sheaves,
And tree-tops dark against the stars grown pale;
Then, clear and shrill, a distant farm-cock crows;
And there's a wall of mist along the vale
Where willows shake their watery-sounding leaves.
He gazes on it all, and scarce believes
That earth is telling its old peaceful tale;
He thanks the blessed world that he was born . . .
Then, far away, a lonely note of the horn.

They're drawing the Big Wood ! Unlatch the gate,
And set Golumpus going on the grass :
He knows the corner where it's best to wait
And hear the crashing woodland chorus pass;
The corner where old foxes make their track
To the Long Spinney; that's the place to be.
The bracken shakes below an ivied tree,

BREAK OF DAY

And then a cub looks out; and "Tally-o-back!"
He bawls, and swings his thong with volleying
crack,—

All the clean thrill of autumn in his blood,
And hunting surging through him like a flood
In joyous welcome from the untroubled past;
While the war drifts away, forgotten at last.

Now a red, sleepy sun above the rim
Of twilight stares along the quiet weald,
And the kind, simple country shines revealed
In solitudes of peace, no longer dim.
The old horse lifts his face and thanks the light,
Then stretches down his head to crop the green.
All things that he has loved are in his sight;
The places where his happiness has been
Are in his eyes, his heart, and they are good.

* * * * *

Hark! there's the horn: they're drawing the Big
Wood.

TO ANY DEAD OFFICER

WELL, how are things in Heaven? I wish you'd say,
Because I'd like to know that you're all right.
Tell me, have you found everlasting day,
Or been sucked in by everlasting night?
For when I shut my eyes your face shows plain;
I hear you make some cheery old remark—
I can rebuild you in my brain,
Though you've gone out patrolling in the dark.

You hated tours of trenches; you were proud
Of nothing more than having good years to
spend;
Longed to get home and join the careless crowd
Of chaps who work in peace with Time for
friend.

That's all washed out now. You're beyond the wire:
No earthly chance can send you crawling back;
You've finished with machine-gun fire—
Knocked over in a hopeless dud-attack.

TO ANY DEAD OFFICER

Somehow I always thought you'd get done in,
Because you were so desperate keen to live :
You were all out to try and save your skin,
Well knowing how much the world had got to
give.
You joked at shells and talked the usual "shop,"
Stuck to your dirty job and did it fine :
With "Jesus Christ ! when *will* it stop ?
Three years. . . . It's hell unless we break their
line."

So when they told me you'd been left for dead
I wouldn't believe them, feeling it *must* be true.
Next week the bloody Roll of Honour said
"Wounded and missing"—(That's the thing to
do
When lads are left in shell-holes dying slow,
With nothing but blank sky and wounds that
ache,
Moaning for water till they know
It's night, and then it's not worth while to
wake !)

* * * * *

TO ANY DEAD OFFICER

Good-bye, old lad ! Remember me to God,
And tell Him that our Politicians swear
They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod
Under the Heel of England. . . Are you there ? . .
Yes . . . and the War won't end for at least two
years ;
But we've got stacks of men. . . . I'm blind with
tears,
Staring into the dark. Cheero !
I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.

SICK LEAVE

WHEN I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,—
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.
While the dim charging breakers of the storm
Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.

They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are
mine.

“ Why are you here with all your watches ended ?

From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line.”

In bitter safety I awake, unfriended ;

And while the dawn begins with slashing rain

I think of the Battalion in the mud.

“ When are you going out to them again ?

Are they not still your brothers through our blood ? ”

BANISHMENT

I AM banished from the patient men who fight.
They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.
Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side,
They trudged away from life's broad wealds of light.
Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight
They went arrayed in honour. But they died,—
Not one by one: and mutinous I cried
To those who sent them out into the night.

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven
To free them from the pit where they must dwell
In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven
By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.
Love drives me back to grope with them through
hell;
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

SONG-BOOKS OF THE WAR

IN fifty years, when peace outshines
Remembrance of the battle lines,
Adventurous lads will sigh and cast
Proud looks upon the plundered past.
On summer morn or winter's night,
Their hearts will kindle for the fight,
Reading a snatch of soldier-song,
Savage and jaunty, fierce and strong;
And through the angry marching rhymes
Of blind regret and haggard mirth,
They'll envy us the dazzling times
When sacrifice absolved our earth.

Some ancient man with silver locks
Will lift his weary face to say :
“ War was a fiend who stopped our clocks
Although we met him grim and gay.”
And then he'll speak of Haig's last drive,
Marvelling that any came alive

SONG-BOOKS OF THE WAR

Out of the shambles that men built
And smashed, to cleanse the world of guilt.
But the boys, with grin and sidelong glance,
Will think, " Poor grandad's day is done."
And dream of those who fought in France
And lived in time to share the fun.

THRUSHES

TOSSED on the glittering air they soar and skim,
Whose voices make the emptiness of light
A windy palace. Quavering from the brim
Of dawn, and bold with song at edge of night,
They clutch their leafy pinnacles and sing
Scornful of man, and from his toils aloof
Whose heart's a haunted woodland whispering;
Whose thoughts return on tempest-baffled wing;
Who hears the cry of God in everything,
And storms the gate of nothingness for proof.

AUTUMN

OCTOBER's bellowing anger breaks and cleaves
The bronzed battalions of the stricken wood
In whose lament I hear a voice that grieves
For battle's fruitless harvest, and the feud
Of outraged men. Their lives are like the leaves
Scattered in flocks of ruin, tossed and blown
Along the westerling furnace flaring red.
O martyred youth and manhood overthrown,
The burden of your wrongs is on my head.

INVOCATION

COME down from heaven to meet me when my
breath
Chokes, and through drumming shafts of stifling
death

I stumble toward escape, to find the door
Opening on morn where I may breathe once more
Clear cock-crow airs across some valley dim
With whispering trees. While dawn along the rim
Of night's horizon flows in lakes of fire,
Come down from heaven's bright hill, my song's
desire,

Belov'd and faithful, teach my soul to wake
In glades deep-ranked with flowers that gleam and
shake
And flock your paths with wonder. In your gaze
Show me the vanquished vigil of my days.

INVOCATION

Mute in that golden silence hung with green,
Come down from heaven and bring me in your
eyes

Remembrance of all beauty that has been,
And stillness from the pools of Paradise.

REPRESSION OF WAR EXPERIENCE

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
What silly beggars they are to blunder in
And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame—
No, no, not that,—it's bad to think of war,
When thoughts you've gagged all day come back
to scare you;
And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
That drive them out to jabber among the trees.

Now light your pipe; look, what a steady hand.
Draw a deep breath; stop thinking; count
fifteen,
And you're as right as rain. . . .

Why won't it rain ? . . .

I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
With bucketsful of water to sluice the dark,
And make the roses hang their dripping heads.

REPRESSION OF WAR EXPERIENCE

Books; what a jolly company they are,
Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves,
Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and
green,

And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
Come on; O *do* read something; they're so wise.

I tell you all the wisdom of the world

Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet

You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,

And listen to the silence: on the ceiling

There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and
flutters;

And in the breathless air outside the house

The garden waits for something that delays.

There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—

Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—

But horrible shapes in shrouds—old men who died

Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,

Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

* * * * *

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at
home;

You'd never think there was a bloody war on! . . .

O yes, you would . . . why, you can hear the guns.

REPRESSION OF WAR EXPERIENCE

Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft . . . they
never cease—

Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out
And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy;
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

THE TRIUMPH

WHEN life was a cobweb of stars for Beauty who
came

In the whisper of leaves or a bird's lone cry in
the glen,
On dawn-lit hills and horizons girdled with flame
I sought for the triumph that troubles the faces
of men.

With death in the terrible flickering gloom of the
fight

I was cruel and fierce with despair; I was naked
and bound;
I was stricken: and Beauty returned through the
shambles of night;
In the faces of men she returned; and their
triumph I found.

SURVIVORS

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and
strain

Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're "longing to go out again,"—

These boys with old, scared faces, learning to
walk,

They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their
cowed

Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll
be proud

Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride . . .
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

CRAIGLOCKART,
Oct. 1917.

JOY-BELLS

RING your sweet bells; but let them be farewells
To the green-vista'd gladness of the past
That changed us into soldiers; swing your bells
To a joyful chime; but let it be the last.

What means this metal in windy belfries hung
When guns are all our need? Dissolve these bells
Whose tones are tuned for peace: with martial
tongue
Let them cry doom and storm the sun with shells.

Bells are like fierce-browed prelates who proclaim
That "if our Lord returned He'd fight for *us*."
So let our bells and bishops do the same,
Shoulder to shoulder with the motor-bus.

REMORSE

LOST in the swamp and welter of the pit,
He flounders off the duck-boards; only he knows
Each flash and spouting crash,—each instant lit
When gloom reveals the streaming rain. He goes
Heavily, blindly on. And, while he blunders,
“Could anything be worse than this?”—he
wonders,
Remembering how he saw those Germans run,
Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees :
Green-faced, they dodged and darted : there was one
Livid with terror, clutching at his knees. . . .
Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs. . . . “O hell !”
He thought—“there's things in war one dare not tell
Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads
Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.”

DEAD MUSICIANS

I

FROM you, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart,
The substance of my dreams took fire.
You built cathedrals in my heart,
And lit my pinnacled desire.
You were the ardour and the bright
Procession of my thoughts toward prayer.
You were the wrath of storm, the light
On distant citadels aflare.

II

Great names, I cannot find you now
In these loud years of youth that strives
Through doom toward peace : upon my brow
I wear a wreath of banished lives.
You have no part with lads who fought
And laughed and suffered at my side.
Your fugues and symphonies have brought
No memory of my friends who died.

DEAD MUSICIANS

III

For when my brain is on their track,
In slangy speech I call them back.
With fox-trot tunes their ghosts I charm.

“ *Another little drink won't do us any harm.*”

I think of rag-time ; a bit of rag-time ;

And see their faces crowding round

To the sound of the syncopated beat.

They've got such jolly things to tell,

Home from hell with a Blighty wound so neat. . . .

* * * * *

And so the song breaks off ; and I'm alone.

They're dead. . . . For God's sake stop that
gramophone.

THE DREAM

I

MOONLIGHT and dew-drenched blossom, and the
scent
 Of summer gardens; these can bring you all
 Those dreams that in the starlit silence fall :
 Sweet songs are full of odours.

While I went

Last night in drizzling dusk along a lane,
 I passed a squalid farm; from byre and midden
 Came the rank smell that brought me once again
 A dream of war that in the past was hidden.

II

Up a disconsolate straggling village street
 I saw the tired troops trudge : I heard their feet.
 The cheery Q.M.S. was there to meet
 And guide our Company in . . .

I watched them stumble

Into some crazy hovel, too beat to grumble;
 Saw them file inward, slipping from their backs
 Rifles, equipment, packs.

THE DREAM

On filthy straw they sit in the gloom, each face
Bowed to patched, sodden boots they must unlace,
While the wind chills their sweat through chinks
and cracks.

III

I'm looking at their blistered feet; young Jones
Stares up at me, mud-splashed and white and
jaded;

Out of his eyes the morning light has faded.
Old soldiers with three winters in their bones
Puff their damp Woodbines, whistle, stretch their
toes :

They can still grin at me, for each of 'em knows
That I'm as tired as they are . . .

Can they guess
The secret burden that is always mine?—
Pride in their courage; pity for their distress;
And burning bitterness
That I must take them to the accursed Line.

IV

I cannot hear their voices, but I see
Dim candles in the barn : they gulp their tea,

THE DREAM

And soon they'll sleep like logs. Ten miles away
The battle winks and thuds in blundering strife.
And I must lead them nearer, day by day,
To the foul beast of war that bludgeons life.

IN BARRACKS

THE barrack-square, washed clean with rain,
Shines wet and wintry-grey and cold.
Young Fusiliers, strong-legged and bold,
March and wheel and march again.
The sun looks over the barrack gate,
Warm and white with glaring shine,
To watch the soldiers of the Line
That life has hired to fight with fate.

Fall out : the long parades are done.
Up comes the dark ; down goes the sun.
The square is walled with windowed light.
Sleep well, you lusty Fusiliers ;
Shut your brave eyes on sense and sight,
And banish from your dreamless ears
The bugle's dying notes that say,
" Another night ; another day."

TOGETHER

SPLASHING along the boggy woods all day,
And over brambled hedge and holding clay,
I shall not think of him :
But when the watery fields grow brown and dim,
And hounds have lost their fox, and horses tire,
I know that he'll be with me on my way
Home through the darkness to the evening fire.

He's jumped each stile along the glistening lanes ;
His hand will be upon the mud-soaked reins ;
Hearing the saddle creak,
He'll wonder if the frost will come next week.
I shall forget him in the morning light ;
And while we gallop on he will not speak :
But at the stable-door he'll say good-night.

